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Topic 4

**EMPOWERING WORK. RECENT CHANGES AND DEVELOPMENTS IN WORK  
CONTENT AND ACCESS TO TRAINING**

Invited paper submitted by Statistics Finland<sup>1</sup>

1. Statistical organisations have been under pressure to develop systems for the measurement of the quality of employment. This is because work life phenomena have become increasingly complex. Changes in the structure of employment, work contents, job contracts and employees' experiences are more and more intertwined, which makes the production of statistics on working life more demanding. Statistics Finland has carried out extensive Quality of Work Life Surveys since 1977 in order to meet the demand for qualitative information on employment. These surveys started as supplements to the Labour Force Surveys and as a result of the discourse on social indicators in the 1970s.
2. In this paper, three subjects will be discussed:
  - 1) Why is the question of "skills-developing work" so important?
  - 2) What is the situation in Finland concerning the development of work and the qualifications of the labour force?
  - 3) How to study, and produce statistics on, these qualitative aspects of working life?

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### **Pressures for change in working life**

3. In the past couple of decades, studies of working life have, to a great extent, been studies of change. Change has been described with innumerable concepts depending on branch of science and research orientation. The factors lying behind these changes and the studies into them have been, above all, economic ones. In the 1980s and 1990s, the economies of the countries in Western Europe have faced at least three types of different challenges: internationalisation of economic relations and intensification of global competition, effects of the new information technology on all areas of economy, and political attacks against the financing of the services of a welfare state.

4. These challenges manifest themselves as growing prevalence of philosophies based on efficiency and productivity and application of methods aimed toward greater flexibility in work. The pressures for change that arise for economic reasons are usually transformed into new points of emphasis in management and labour use strategies.

5. The emphasis in organisational development has varied between many issues. The Tayloristic model of work organisation was first followed by socio-technical work modelling and quality of work life programmes. This meant a new orientation in which the focus was on the employee. Work organisations were being planned to comply with the criteria of "good work" and "good working conditions". However, a clear change in the emphasis took place in the 1980s and it could be said that in the 1990s, development centred on the concept of "productivity". This change has also been described as a shift from the "quality of working life" thinking to the development model for "high performance organisations".

6. Similar development can also be seen in work process theories. The notion was to develop work processes so that they would comply with the employees' human needs. However, the introduction of the concept of "flexibility" changed this orientation. "Flexible firm" became the focus of thinking. "Flexible specialisation" was also employed to guide the work life developments. Flexibility is generally classified into two types: numerical, or external, flexibility and functional, or internal, flexibility. John Atkinson's theory on the different forms of flexibility involves mainly the labour force strategies of business management: flexibility is achieved both by adjusting numerically (mobility, working hours) and functionally (multi-skilling) to product demands and technological changes.

7. The tendencies toward increased productivity and flexibility can have both positive and negative effects from the employees' point of view. In order to evaluate these, and avoid negative effects, several programmes have been established at e.g. the European Union level. The contemporary "Employment strategy" and the green paper "Partnership for a new organisation of work" put much emphasis on avoiding the negative side effects. Additionally, the demands for gender equality and for empowering elderly people to stay in employment are policies that need information and statistics especially on the qualitative aspects of work, i.e. on how the new tendencies affect the working age population.

## **Results from studies into Finnish working life**

8. Statistics Finland has carried out extensive (between 3,000 to 6,000 persons interviewed) questionnaire surveys among the wage earning population in 1977, 1984, 1990 and 1997. The core contents of the surveys have remained unchanged throughout, so their results describe fairly accurately the changes that have taken place in the working life, and especially in the wage earners' own experiences of their working conditions, over two decades. The interviews have included questions on the physical, mental and social work environment and the employees' experiences relating to it, as well as questions on work experience, position in the labour market, conditions of employment, occurrence of physical and psychological symptoms, work motivation, job content and experiences relating to gender equality and fair treatment.

9. The position of Finnish employees in working life can be internationally compared against the findings of the Second European Survey on Working Conditions. The survey was implemented in 1996 in all the Member States of the European Union, from each of which 1,000 employed persons, wage and salary earners and entrepreneurs took part in it (Paoli 1997). The topics covered by the survey ranged from problems in the physical working environment to the organisation of work, social working environment and health effects. Thus, the survey makes it possible to at least partially examine the same phenomena that were studied in the Finnish Quality of Work Life Surveys.

10. Especially in its green paper "Partnership for a new organisation of work", the European Union has stressed the importance of new workplace ethics in conjunction with flexibility targets. This kind of development of work puts much emphasis on "training, confidential relationships and employee participation". From the point of gender equality, one could ask how the new models of work organisation, and the improvement and diversification of skills acquired through training help toward the attainment of equality.

11. Life-long learning is probably a principle in all management models, from human resources management to profit, quality and process management. Yet, the European Survey on Working Conditions showed that, on the whole, learning and development are at quite a low level. For example, only one in three wage and salary earners had received training paid for by the employer in the past year. Thankfully, according to the EU survey the proportion in Finland stands out in a class of its own at nearly 60 per cent. Finland's leading position applies to both women and men. In general, in-service training is more plentiful in the Nordic Countries, the Netherlands and Britain than elsewhere in Europe.

12. A close analysis of in-house training by age reveals the reason why these countries are the leaders: in the other countries, next to no vocational in-house training is offered to the older age groups of those over 45.

13. Finland also leads in respect of the question of whether work includes learning new things. In this, the attitude of Finnish women to their work appears to be particularly optimistic: 91 per cent of female wage and salary earners regarded their work developmental in this sense, while only 54 per cent of the female wage and salary earners in, for example, Greece, were of this opinion.

14. Training and skills development are necessary in today's working life particularly due to the advancing information technology. To a large extent, the distinction of Finnish employers in offering training can be explained by the fact that the new information technology is a working tool for so many Finnish employees. In this comparative survey, only the Netherlands shows a more widespread use of the computer. In terms of women's computer use, the joint leaders are Finland and the Netherlands in both of which 51 per cent of female wage and salary earners use the computer at work for at least one quarter of their working time.

15. The European Survey on Working Conditions also reveals that factors relating to reorganisation of work, like task rotation in teams, participation in the quality control of one's own work and participation in the planning of one's own work through discussions with superiors and co-workers are more highly developed than average in Finnish working life. No major differences can be observed in these aspects between the genders either in Finland or elsewhere.

16. The European Union's green paper on the organisation of work (1997) particularly emphasises the importance of finding a balance between flexibility and job security. Less attention is paid to the negative consequences that can result from a strong drive for productivity and efficiency. In Finnish working life, such emphases have clearly also brought along negative aspects like excessive time and work-related pressure.

17. The growth of stress at work is not an exclusively Finnish phenomenon. A study of the Member States of the European Union revealed that in all the countries where development had been studied over an extended timespan, experiences of time pressure had increased in the 1980s and 1990s. (Dhondt 1998.) For Finns, however, the problem is of particular relevance: Finland leads in all measurements of time pressure in the European Survey on Working Conditions. Time pressure on Finnish women is particularly evident in international comparisons, which is no doubt linked to Finnish women's strong orientation towards work and the concentration of women's employment in public sector service occupations which, after all, were the target of particularly severe cuts during the 1990s.

18. The results - although only generally indicative - suggest that Finnish working life is on the brink of transformation. Finnish employees participate more than usual in the development of working life, but at the same time find themselves in working conditions that are more tiring than average.

19. In international comparisons, Finland is distinguished by its greater proportion of educated women compared to men. Within the European Union, Finland is one of the few countries in which the proportion of those who have completed secondary education is greater among the female than male population (aged 25-64). Other countries in this group include Ireland, Sweden and Portugal. Of these countries, Sweden and Finland are, for the time being, in a class of their own in the proportion of those with qualifications. In Finland 67 per cent, in Sweden 75 per cent, in Ireland 54 per cent and in Portugal 20 per cent of women have qualifications of at least upper secondary level. (Education at a Glance, 1998).

**More learning and deeper commitment to work**

20. The Quality of Work Life Surveys which Statistics Finland has implemented in 1977, 1984, 1990 and 1997 give a more detailed account than statistics of how working conditions are experienced. Repeated over an extended period of time, the surveys also reveal changes that have taken place in working life. The results show the same simultaneity of positive and negative changes that emerges as the special Finnish characteristics from the findings of the European survey.
21. The long-term changes that are positive include the opportunity to develop oneself and receive further training, be given more varied tasks, participate in technical changes and, generally, the opportunity to influence the component parts of one's own work.
22. From the very beginning, the Quality of Work Life Surveys have included a question of how the respondents rate their opportunities for development at work. The topic has been studied in three Quality of Work Life Surveys and these show an upward trend in the development in this respect. This is more evident among women than men. However, most of the positive growth took place in the 1980s and the latest survey would seem to indicate that men have again passed women in this.
23. Examined by occupation, men's administrative management work seems to offer the best development opportunities. More than one half of the female respondents see their opportunities for development equally good in both administrative management and teaching work. There is a clear pattern of growth in this with female employees doing health care work (29% - 37% - 44%), office work (26% - 33% - 38%), and teaching (42% - 38% - 53%). Of these, at least the development in office work is probably connected with the rapid development of information technology.
24. Examined by employer sector, central government stands out in the developmental nature of its work, followed by municipalities. The responses indicate that the private sector offers least opportunities for development. The perception of development opportunities correlates clearly with high educational level but is not in any way dependent on age.
25. Development at work is clearly a different matter from work and career advancement. Distinctly fewer opportunities are reported for advancement than for development. Furthermore, the change in a positive direction has been very slow. On the other hand, women have always felt that their opportunities for advancement are worse than men's. The latest survey even points toward slight regression in the case of women in this respect. Admittedly, the differences in the percentages are minor and it is also not always quite clear what exactly is meant by advancement opportunities. Precisely women have questioned the meaning of the concept. For many it is more important to develop in one's own work than advance up the hierarchical ladder.
26. The only group that sees their advancement opportunities as good are men doing commercial work: 24 per cent of them regard their opportunities as good. Of women's fields, only commercial work and transport and communications (incl. data communications) work are those where advancement opportunities have gone up slightly. Especially among women, both

professional (scientific, healthcare, teaching work) and manufacturing occupations are fields in which there is no belief in advancement, or it may not even be considered important. The distribution in the perception of advancement opportunities is, in fact, very similar among men. Compared to the 1977 results, men's perceptions about this have declined in healthcare and administrative management work in which optimism in respect of advancement has waned. Cautiously ascending fields in this respect are commercial, office and construction work.

27. The numbers of those wage and salary earners who consider their advancement opportunities to be good are usually the lowest in the municipal sector. Again, the differences by age and education are only minimal. Education does not appear to clearly increase optimism about advancement. In fact, the contrary is true in respect of women: highly educated women believe only averagely in their advancement opportunities. With men, advancing level of education clearly increases faith in opportunities for ascending up the hierarchical ladder.

28. Contrastingly, previously acquired training correlates strongly with opportunities for receiving training paid for by the employer. Participation in training is also strongly connected with socio-economic group. While 70 per cent of upper white-collar employees had participated in this type of training over the last 12 months, the corresponding proportion among blue-collar workers was only 28 per cent. Participation in in-house training has spread strongly – from 27 to 47 per cent - in Finland over the past two decades. It has become slightly more widespread among women than men. This despite the fact that receiving it is rarer in insecure employment relationships –e.g. those agreed for a fixed term – than in permanent ones.

29. The development activities and structural changes that are taking place at workplaces have brought with them an important change concerning women's work: the monotony of work has decreased, and variety increased. A couple of decades ago, it was still typical in Finland for women's work to be very monotonous. Almost one third of women felt their work was monotonous, while less than a fifth of men were of this opinion. The change has been rapid. Today there is no longer any difference between the genders. One explanation to the change is the spread of service type of work and, for example, the almost total disappearance of women's - highly Tayloristically organised – manufacturing work.

30. Women's manufacturing work continues to be regarded as the most monotonous. Thus, the increased variety of women's work is primarily a consequence of the reduction in manufacturing work. On the other hand, the growth areas of women's work (over the past two decades) of health and social care work have also become more varied along with the growth. Women's office work has also grown more varied despite its contraction as a field.

### **Work-related pressure the worst threat to coping**

31. The European Survey on Working Conditions demonstrates in an astonishing way the extent to which time pressure and stress are particularly Finnish problems. Asked about in various different ways, like as "Do you have enough time to do your work?" or "How much of your time do you work under time pressure?" or "to tight time schedules", Finnish employees, particularly women, complain the most about work-related stress.

32. Increasing time pressure is the feature that has also emerged as the clearest change from the Finnish Quality of Work Life Surveys. The change concerns all occupational fields and industries, but there have also been clear shifts of focus between fields. Earlier, in the 1970s, the adverse effects of time pressure were the most typical in manufacturing, where especially women worked under excessive time pressure. Since then, healthcare work has become the most pressured in this respect. In the most recent Quality of Work Life Survey, as many as 44 per cent of employees working in this field regarded time pressure as a major contributor to stress while the corresponding proportion relative to the whole wage and salary earning population was 33 per cent. Work in the teaching field has also traditionally been among those most hampered by time pressure.

33. By employer sector, the change has meant that municipalities have become the leaders in statistics on time pressure at work in the 1990s. Examined by gender, women seem to suffer most from it, and by age group, those in the middle age group (25 to 45 years).

34. When work-related stress and time pressure have been studied by a sum variable combining a number of factors, it becomes obvious that the increase in time pressure is clearly linked with the increased application of productivity and efficiency policies. Diverse experiences of time pressure had increased most at workplaces where performance evaluation and monitoring had been increased. New ways of work organisation, such as teamwork, also produce, particularly among women, more pressure if they are applied blindly without taking into account the orientation and commitment typical of women. Excessive pressure causes conflicts, bullying, psychological and psychosomatic symptoms, mistakes and, of course, absences.

35. The negative change in the position of the employees in Finland is thus essentially characterised by the fact that productivity and flexibility strategies have led to increasing time pressure and insecure employment relationships. These, in turn, have brought with them a worsening of the atmosphere at the workplace, an increase of conflicts and even mental violence. At the individual level, time pressure, work-related stress and insecurity have led to tiredness, various stress symptoms, problems in the reconciliation of work and family and the much-discussed burnout.

### **Bringing quality to survey research. Methodological triangulation**

36. The conventional survey methodology has shown to be problematic in studies on living conditions and, for example, in the Quality of Work Life Surveys. This has brought about the need to combine qualitative and quantitative research methods in the same survey system.

37. Qualitative and quantitative research methods can be combined in a variety of ways. It is not exceptional for different methods to be used in the same survey. In the area of research into the Finnish working life alone one could list a number of examples of surveys in which data have first been collected with questionnaires, for example, and then by exploiting several more qualitative forms of data collection. The problem is that the coupling of methods has generally neither been problemised nor exploited to understand the relationship between the methods.

38. Analytical combining of methods should also go beyond the aspect of mere quality control. Statistical organisations have practised quality control in their surveys for a considerable number of years already. Pilot surveys have been tape-recorded and attempts have been made to interpret from them the respondents' reactions in order to improve the used questionnaires further. Some statistical organisations have even established special questionnaire development sections which exploit cognitive psychology.

39. At its best, analytical combining of survey methods should take into account the paradigmatic differences of the methods. In other words, recognise what kind of perception of truth, surveyor/surveyee relationship and evidence collection mode appertains to each specific methodology. I present below a summary of the impacts of using qualitative methods together with quantitative surveys.

*Benefits to a survey from the combining of qualitative and quantitative methods*

- can be directed to new phenomena, concepts and theories
- helps to diversify results obtained on averages
- diversifies question formulation and interpretation of results by exploiting meanings
- brings results closer to everyday life, subjects' activities and experiences (life entity, groups)
- can combine processive descriptions with cross-section data
- facilitates describing change
- can study the relationship between local and general

**Does the idea of triangulation work in practice?**

40. The latest Finnish Quality of Work Life Survey was carried out by Statistics Finland in the autumn of 1997. How qualitative and quantitative methods could be combined was experimented with in the designing of this survey for the first time. The actual questionnaire of the survey, directed to 3,000 persons, was compiled using unstructured interviews as help.

41. Certain themes were selected to be covered by the unstructured interviews. The themes included the experiencing of insecurity in employment relationships, time pressure and work-related stress, and experiencing of equality, discrimination and social relationships. The questions relating to each of these themes on the questionnaires of the previous survey rounds (1977, 1984 and 1990) were first used in the interviews. They were presented as they are and the respondents were additionally asked to give an assessment of how easy they were to answer, how they understood them and what they meant with their answers. Following this, each theme was discussed freely and informally.

42. The experiment of combining qualitative and quantitative data collection methods made it possible to focus on the problematic features of the conventional survey. It facilitated finding new features in the examined phenomena, analysing the meanings given to the concepts used in the survey, getting closer to the subjects' everyday lives, recognising the processive nature of phenomena, etc. The combining of data collection methods not only revealed matters of major relevance in questionnaire design but also information useful in the later interpretation of the responses. The intention is to support the interpretation even further with qualitative data, collected later from a group selected on the basis of the questionnaire survey. It would, therefore, seem evident that combining the qualitative and quantitative approaches in the same survey



entity is possible and that the combining can be implemented in an interactive way and not just as parallel data collection methods.

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